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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Another week of wacky roller coaster rides on Wall St., the Red Sox, politics, and golf courses! Now, I'm sure everyone is aware of what is happening with the stock market - watching your investments and/or retirement funds continue to go down the tubes. All of this is starting to trickle down to the state and city/town level now. Major cuts in our state government finances which I'm sure we'll be paying for soon enough. One way or another, it's the taxpayer who ends up footing the bills!

Although much earlier than last year, we've received layoff notices at the golf course. My last day will be tomorrow. It's been a tough year this year - cutbacks in staffing and hours, and supplies were down. Using equipment that is outdated and falling apart is a tough way to maintain a golf course. At least I'll still be able to play for free, as long as the weather holds! Remember though, we're talking about New England weather, folks!

And, the Red Sox live to play another day! I thought for sure that it was all over with Game 5! Down 7-0 and the Sox come back and win it! While I shouldn't be surprised, citing a few recent playoff series, I was. At least I still have a team to cheer since my Cubs got swept under the proverbial rug in the first round!

So, while we all wonder how we're going to fare these next few months with the economy and political fiascoes, let's enjoy another issue of A-ONE together!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Editor's note: Due to another week of little newsgroup activity and some personal health issues, People Are Talking will not appear in this week's issue. Stay tuned to next week when we resume.

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Diablo 3 Coming to Consoles?
New 'Xbox Experience' Too Much?
Infogrames Now Owns Atari!
And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

'Diablo 3' Could Appear on Consoles

There's yet to be any official confirmation that the upcoming Diablo 3 will be released on anything other than the PC, but according to recent comments made by Blizzard president Mike Morhaime, it certainly seems like they're strongly considering console versions of the highly anticipated sequel at some point in the future.

"Every game we have the discussion about which platforms make the most sense," said Morhaime in an interview with Shacknews at BlizzCon. "As Diablo 3 takes shape, I think we'll do an evaluation. I think there is a pretty good argument to be made that that type of game might work very well on consoles. There might be some technical limitations though that we might need to get past."

Backing up Morhaime's comments were those made by Diablo 3 director Jay Wilson, who also thinks console versions of Diablo 3 could work well. "We haven't really decided to take the [console] plunge," Wilson said. "We've really come to the conclusion that [Diablo 3] is probably the best fit because the control scheme is actually not that incompatible. So if we were to make that decision, Diablo would be the natural choice."

What Blizzard won't do, however, is do a quick and dirty port. "If we did it, we would want to do a really high quality version - we wouldn't just want to do a port," Wilson said. "We would never make that decision if we thought we had to compromise the overall quality...we could probably do it at any time, we could release the game and then decide we wanted to do an Xbox 360 version or a PlayStation 3 version."

Seeing a console version of Diablo 3 down the line wouldn't be unprecedented - the original Diablo eventually received a port on the PlayStation, and there have been countless action RPGs in the Diablo mold released on consoles as well (Phantasy Star Online comes to mind). And *that* was back in the Dark Ages when online gameplay on consoles was mostly unheard of.

New ’Xbox Experience’ Too Much For Some 360s

There’s a lot to look forward to in the upcoming New Xbox Experience - set to launch on November 19 - but for those who own Xbox 360s without a hard drive or a 256MB memory card, you may have to go through a few headaches before you can download it.

Speaking to "Xbox360Fanboy", Microsoft’s Larry "Major Nelson" Hryb revealed that the full download size of the NXE will be 128MB, which will make it too large for a "small percentage" of 360 owners sans hard drive.

Major Nelson did, however, promise that a "storage solution" will be made available for these users... but refused to provide any details for now. His full comment follows:

"The new Xbox experience will require 128MB of free space. A hard drive is recommended for the optimal experience, to take advantage of some new features, and to be able to enjoy the great movies, TV shows and games available on Xbox LIVE. While we expect the majority of consumers to download the New Xbox Experience without a problem, a small percentage of Xbox 360 owners do not have enough memory to accommodate the update. To help ensure all Xbox LIVE members are able to download the New Xbox Experience and enjoy its new features, Microsoft will be offering storage solutions to the Xbox LIVE community. We are not sharing details of this offering yet. Be sure to check xbox.com for more details in the coming weeks."

Presumably, these details *will* be made available before the required update launches on November 19 (we hope). The main issue here does indeed seem to be the fact that the NXE is a required dashboard update, as it’s uncertain what a 360 owner’s options will be if they simply don’t have the means to download it. Guess we’ll find out whenever Microsoft details their solution.

New Energy Star 5.0 Update Targets Game Consoles

As part of its plan to improve the efficiency of all of our gadgets, the EPA aims to expand its Energy Star program to include gaming consoles.

Version 5.0 of the Energy Star specification, due out in July of 2009, will therefore address the power consumption of Wiis, Xboxes, and PlayStations for the first time ever with a brand new set of requirements. The challenge, of course is the long lifecycle of consoles, which tend to get revved only every three or four years. How to spur innovation now?

Well, you have to start someplace. According to the newly released Energy Star 5.0 Draft 3 (which hasn’t been posted to the site yet, unfortunately), the agency "had hoped that Tier 1 requirements would encourage near-term efficiencies and also make energy efficiency a design priority for this product area in the coming years."

The goal: "EPA is proposing a set of requirements that combines those

proposed previously under two distinct Tiers. This new single Tier has a proposed effective date of July 1, 2010. It is EPA's hope that this approach will give game console manufacturers design lead time, while also ensuring Energy Star qualified game consoles will offer consumers significant energy savings."

The details of the proposal:

Operational Mode Requirements

Off Mode: - 1 W Sleep or Auto-Off: - 5 W

Power Management and Efficient Operation Requirements

Sleep or Auto-Off

The console shall power down to a sleep mode after 1 hour of inactivity; and Provide Game Developers the tools/features allowing APD within games or programs designed for the console; and Automatically APD when games are in an inactive or paused game state; and provide for Full Network Connectivity in sleep.

TV/Display Sleep

The console shall have the ability to drop Component, Composite, DVI outputs (using in-place standards where applicable) when the system is inactive for 15 minutes. Ability to do this in HDMI should be implemented once a HDMI standard for doing so exists; and Provide visual feedback on the console's integrated display or LEDs calling attention to the consoles continued active state while outputs are dropped.

Power Scaling

Set Top Box (STB) and DVD/Blu Ray/Movie Playback functions must come within 10% of the requirements in place for the Energy Star STB Specification Version 2.0, Tier 2 (finalized on April 23, 2008). Game consoles must be tested using the test procedure in the Set Top Box specification to evaluate their ability to meet the requirement.

Efficient Networking

Implement IEEE 802.3az and Full Network Connectivity in Sleep for Ethernet and Wi-Fi. Wireless Access Point functions must use less than 10W.

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->A-ONE Gaming Online - Online Users Growl & Purr!
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Infogrames Completes Atari Acquisition

Infogrames Completes Atari Acquisition French publisher Infogrames

(/Alone In The Dark/) has officially completed its acquisition of U.S. based Atari, Inc. Although Infogrames was previously the majority shareholder, Atari now becomes a wholly owned subsidiary.

Infogrames will pay $1.68 per share for all outstanding shares of Atari common stock not already owned by Infogrames or its affiliates. This gives the merger an approximate value of $11 million, which Infogrames will pay for from existing cash resources.

The management team of Atari, Inc. (which is unrelated in all but name and logo to the original Atari video games company) joins the Infogrames group, led by recently appointed president and CEO Jim Wilson, senior vice president of sales Tim Flynn and vice president of marketing Jeff Reese.

The merger simplifies the relationship between the two companies, with a new global structure intended to reduce general and administrative expenses (including those related to being a U.S. public company) and generate economies of scale.

Atari’s management team has been tasked with furthering the company?s U.S. distribution business and creating new partnerships. Developing the company?s online operations will also be a priority, as Infogrames focuses more on the casual market.

"The completion of this merger is an important step in the implementation of our strategy. Reshaping US operations was a key element of our ?Atari transformation? plan,? says Infogrames president and CEO David Gardner.

"Profitable first quarter results were reached thanks to the tremendous work accomplished by Jim [Wilson] and his team," he adds.

"The completion of the merger creates a simplified efficient global structure that we anticipate will generate greater opportunities to expand US distribution capabilities and strengthen our platform for global online initiatives."

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

FCC Green-Lights Wireless Free Internet

The Federal Communications Commission has released an engineering report that opens the door for the FCC to apportion a chunk of wireless spectrum for free Internet services across the nation.

"We need to reserve some spectrum for free broadband services," FCC Chairman Kevin Martin said. "This would be a lifeline broadband service that would be designed for lower-income people who may not otherwise

have access to the Internet."

T-Mobile had warned that the FCC's proposed launch of an advanced wireless service (AWS) in the 2155-MHz to 2180-MHz band would interfere with the 3G wireless services it operates in an adjacent slice of the spectrum. However, lab tests conducted last month demonstrated that devices operating at FCC-designated power levels would not present "a significant risk of harmful interference," the commission said.

Several aspects of the FCC's AWS proposal owe their origin to an application submitted two years ago by M2Z Networks, which envisioned earning money primarily by offering a premium wireless Internet service operating at speeds of up to three megabits per second. However, the Arlington, Va.-based startup also proposed to provide a free lower-speed service that would pay for itself by generating advertising revenue.

The FCC now says that the ultimate winner of its AWS spectrum auction must use up to 25 percent of its capacity to provide free, two-way broadband Internet service at data rates of at least 768 kilobits per second in the downstream direction. Moreover, the commission has embraced M2Z's call for the use of a network-based filtering mechanism to block Web content deemed unsuitable for children.

The winning spectrum bidder will be required to provide signal coverage and offer service into at least 50 percent of the total United States within four years, and to at least 95 percent of the U.S. population by the end of the 10-year license term. Moreover, the FCC is mandating that the provider of free Internet service allow consumers to use open devices on the network.

AWS is just one example of the ways in which the FCC is hoping to foster a nationwide broadband connectivity boost. The FCC is also currently considering approval of a plan to allow the so-called "white spaces" between TV channels to be used for the launch of wireless broadband on a nationwide basis.

"Adopting a national policy to stimulate the deployment of broadband in underserved areas of the nation could have dramatic and far-reaching economic impacts," say the authors of a recent study by the nonprofit Connected Nation. Among other things, the group concludes that the acceleration of broadband coverage could generate a positive economic impact amounting to $134 billion per year, including the $92 billion expected to come from 2.4 million jobs it would create or save on an annual basis.

Still, the wireless and broadcast establishments remain wary about potential interference issues and are likely to view any FCC action that impairs or diminishes their ability to use the spectrum they have purchased as a "decisive breach" of the commission's contractual obligations. "Auction winners would have a legal right to seek money damages against the commission for that breach," T-Mobile counsel Lynn Charytan said.

However, Martin said the FCC's proposed standards of protection are "at least as strong" as the standards it uses to auction off any other spectrum. To prevent interference, the FCC chairman said, "the standards are actually going to be tougher."

OpenOffice 3 Available for Mac, Windows and Linux

The OpenOffice business productivity suite is now available as a native Mac application for the first time.

Version 3.0 of the free open-source software - which integrates word processor, spreadsheet, presentation, graphics, formula and database capabilities - is now available for download for Windows, Mac and Linux computers.

"With 3.0, the application is more interoperable with MS Office, more capable, more extensible," said Louis Suarez-Potts, community manager of OpenOffice.org. "It frees the desktop from vendor lock-in."

OpenOffice 3.0 features a number of improvements that should appeal to users of past suites, as well as anyone thinking about making the change from Microsoft Office. For example, the suite can now open files created with Microsoft Office 2007 or Microsoft Office 2008 for Mac OS X.

The new software suite also smooths the way for making better use of Visual Basic for Applications macros, and even supports Microsoft Access 2007 .accdb files. And it is fully compatible with the latest ISO document standard known as Open Document Format 1.2, which is being being mandated for use in a growing number of countries.

OpenOffice 3.0 even makes it easier for anyone to participate in the new Web 2.0 world without having to learn and master esoteric web languages such as XHTML and MediaWiki, said John McCreesh, OpenOffice.org marketing project lead. "Users can create Web and Wiki documents straight from Writer," he explained.

To reduce the feature bloat commonly encountered in Microsoft Office and other productivity suites, OpenOffice.org has elected to relegate a number of supplemental functions to its online-extensions repository. Even more capabilities are available from third-party developers, including an Impress presenter console, support for business analytics, PDF import, and the creation of Hybrid PDF documents.

OpenOffice.org struggled Tuesday to keep up with the dizzying pace of worldwide download requests. However, I was able to download and install the suite with a minimum of fuss.

OpenOffice 3.0 sports a flashier user interface featuring a more graphic-intensive start center, a splash screen, and a colorful icon refresh. The Writer application in OpenOffice 3.0 now features a slider control in the bottom right corner of the display window for zooming, which will even enable multipage displays while editing.

Writer’s latest language-selector tool gives users the ability to assign a different language to individual paragraphs other than the language assigned to the overall document. This makes editing and spell-checking of documents in multiple languages a much less onerous task.

What’s more, Writer aficionados finally have more control over the way that selected Web content is displayed within the text-editing program. By using the Ctrl-Shift-V command, the user gains the option of pasting content into the program in a standard HTML format, as HTML without comments, or just plain old unformatted text.

On the Spreadsheet side, the application has been expanded from 256 columns to 1024 columns per sheet. Also on tap: A new Solver tool that will allow users to calculate the optimum value of a particular spreadsheet cell based on constraints provided in other cells.

OpenOffice 3.0 also now allows multiple users to collaborate on spreadsheets. Even better, the suite's PDF export feature now features a far wider set of formatting and security options.

Mozilla Releases Firefox 3.1 Beta 1 for Public Testing

Mozilla's Firefox 3.1 beta 1, now available for public download, is loaded with new features that once again put the Firefox developer community on the cutting edge of browser development.

Code-named Shiretoko, the first test version of Mozilla's free upgrade to Firefox 3 is being touted as a public-preview release ostensibly intended for the developer community. However, everyday Web surfers will also find much to like about the improvements over Firefox 3 in Web compatibility, performance and speed.

Under the hood, Firefox 3.1 beta 1 sports a number of improvements that won't be readily apparent to the casual Internet surfer, but are sure do make a difference in overall performance. The browser is based on the new Gecko 1.9.1 rendering platform, which incorporates a number of changes that collectively act to improve performance and ease of use.

Support is provided for the latest Cascading Style Sheet (CSS) properties for Web pages written in HTML and XHTML. Also on tap is support for a number of esoteric Web technologies of interest to developers, such as JavaScript query selectors, Web worker threads, SVG transforms, and offline applications.

From the user's perspective, one of the more obvious improvements is search. Conducting searches within the browser's smart location bar is even easier and more productive. Results can now be restricted to only show the user's history, bookmarks, tagged Web pages, or smart keywords. Here's how it works:

Searches are restricted to user history by typing a caret (^) in front of the search term. Or searches can be limited to bookmarks by prefacing with an asterisk (*) or to tagged pages with a plus sign (+).

Firefox developers have also added a new tab-switching shortcut that makes it easy to display a thumbnail overview of all the Web pages currently open in the browser's tabs. Hold down the control key and click the Tab key to scroll through and select the page you want to view.

Firefox 3.1 beta 1 fully supports the W3C Geolocation API behind the experimental Geode add-on that Mozilla unveiled earlier this month. What's cool about Geode is that the technology finally gives Web sites the ability to request - and surfers to optionally grant - access to the user's approximate position, so searches can produce results ranked by proximity.

Though Firefox 3.1 beta 1 will overwrite existing installations of Firefox, testers need not worry about losing their existing bookmarks

and browsing history, which are ported over to the new version. However, certain Firefox extensions and other add-ons may not work in the latest beta version, though in my case this did not present a problem.

I did not come across any major issues with Firefox 3.1 beta when viewing the many Web sites that I typically visit daily. In this respect, the overall experience was far more satisfying than with early beta releases of Firefox 3.

And should you elect to return to Firefox 3 after taking the new 3.1 beta version for a test drive, don't fret about losing any personalized data, extensions or other add-ons. According to Mozilla, all this information is stored separately with the user's profile.

Microsoft Makes Windows 7 Name Final

For the first time in recent memory, Microsoft has chosen to stick with its code name for a final Windows release.

In a blog posting, general manager Mike Nash said that the next version of Windows will retain its Windows 7 code-name when it is released to the market - a date currently pegged as late 2009 or early 2010.

"Simply put, this is the seventh release of Windows, so therefore "Windows 7" just makes sense," Nash wrote.

Microsoft plans to give developers at the Professional Developer Conference later this month a pre-beta version of the software.

"For me, one of the most exciting times in the release of a new product is right before we show it to the world for the first time," Nash wrote. "In a few weeks we are going to be talking about the details of this release at the PDC and at WinHEC. We will be sharing a pre-beta 'developer only release' with attendees of both shows and giving them the first broad in-depth look at what we've been up to."

Nash said the decision to stick with the Windows 7 name is "about simplicity."

"Over the years, we have taken different approaches to naming Windows," Nash wrote. "We've used version numbers like Windows 3.11, or dates like Windows 98, or 'aspirational' monikers like Windows XP or Windows Vista. And since we do not ship new versions of Windows every year, using a date did not make sense. Likewise, coming up with an all-new 'aspirational' name does not do justice to what we are trying to achieve, which is to stay firmly rooted in our aspirations for Windows Vista, while evolving and refining the substantial investments in platform technology in Windows Vista into the next generation of Windows."

Microsoft has said precious little about what's actually in Windows 7. In a May interview, engineering chief Steven Sinofsky said it would use the same driver structure and underpinnings as Vista. The software maker has also talked about its multitouch capability.

Chrome Advances But Has a Way To Go in Browser Wars

The browser wars are alive and well. While Google is working out the kinks in its beta version of Chrome - a Wednesday update fixed issues with crashing and video playback - Firefox is pushing a beta 3.1 version that promises new features and better performance. Meanwhile, market leader Microsoft still dominates with Internet Explorer 7.

"The browser wars continue. But consumers already have plenty of choices with IE, Safari, Firefox and Opera. The real question is if Google can get those users to shift. Mainstream consumers are wondering why they need to make the transition," said Michael Gartenberg, vice president of mobile strategy for Jupitermedia. "Chrome is still a solution in search of a problem."

If test results from WebSketch are right, Chrome may have a marketable advantage: Speed. The company reported a 3x performance improvement over Microsoft IE 7 when using Google Chrome.

In its internal benchmarking tests, editing sites using Chrome is on average three times faster than with IE, WebSketch said. The company said the benefits of Chrome’s V8 JavaScript engine also make adding, moving and resizing objects such as Flickr photos, YouTube videos, and other widgets significantly faster and smoother.

Google may have an advantage for the time being, but how long is another matter. Like Chrome, upcoming versions of Firefox and Safari are developed with JavaScript-heavy Web 2.0 applications in mind in order to deliver a rich, interactive user experience. That once again levels the playing field and makes it harder to convince consumers to make the switch, analysts said.

Even if Chrome is faster with Web 2.0 applications, the Google-branded browser still has plenty of problems to solve to compete with Microsoft and Mozilla. Google has not indicated how long Chrome might remain in beta, but the company is known for leaving products in testing mode for long periods of time.

There’s also the question of whether Google can ink some deals with PC makers to make Chrome the default browser. At the end of the day, Gartenberg said, most consumers simply use the browser that comes with their PC. "If Chrome is not going to be the de facto choice," he said, "then Google is going to have an uphill battle getting people to download it and install it."

Despite all the technology hype and the privacy-advocate hubbub at Chrome’s launch, most consumers aren’t rushing to download, install and regularly use the browser. In other words, there is no "Mozilla effect" on the browser market. When Mozilla launched Firefox, the market was starving for a browser alternative with better security and cutting-edge features.

"When Firefox came to market, people were interested in something other than Microsoft. Microsoft had a lousy reputation in terms of its browser technology. So the fact that Firefox wasn’t Microsoft helped Mozilla make a lot of inroads with a lot of people," Gartenberg said. "Still, IE’s adoption numbers are the most dominant. We’ll have to see whether Google can come up with something to give mainstream users a reason to use Chrome."

Samsung Re-enters U.S. Laptop Market

Diversified electronics maker Samsung Electronics Co Ltd said it is re-entering the U.S. computer market with a range of branded products that build on its component supply strengths.

The Korean-based company will introduce on Tuesday new ultralight notebooks designed to appeal to potential buyers of Apple Inc's ground-breaking MacBook Air and smaller "netbook" models from the likes of Asustek Computer.

Breaking into the crowded U.S. market involves taking share from more established players. The Korean electronics maker sees other Asian brand-name players as vulnerable, especially Toshiba Corp, Sony Corp and Lenovo.

Samsung is also coming out with models aimed at business professionals and the market for bulkier laptops known as "desktop replacements," a Samsung executive said.

Like Apple's Air, Samsung's X-Series premium lightweight notebooks come with options for either a hard drive or solid state memory. But Samsung's X360 is priced at $2,499 and carries 128 gigabytes of flash memory, twice the 64 gigabytes that comes with the Apple Air selling for $2,598.

"These products really go after Apple and Sony. This is the MacBook Air killer," Bret Berg, the senior product manager for Samsung's U.S. computer division, said in an interview.

The X360 weighs 2.8 pounds and has an ultra-thin, tapered wedge design with a magnesium allow chassis, an aluminum top and a "pebble"-style keyboard.

Samsung's hard-drive version, the X460, starts at $1,899 for a 160-gigabyte hard drive, twice the capacity of Apple's existing MacBook Air model that is priced at $1,799 for an 80-gigabyte drive. The X460 weighs just under 4.2 pounds.

Its premium netbook, the NC10, in white or metallic-blue colored cases, starts at $499 with a 10.2-inch display and 160 gigabyte hard drive. Netbooks are a smaller class of PCs that are lower priced than notebooks and can sell for $300 or less.

Samsung is positioning its product between lower cost EEE PCs from Asustek and the smallest full-scale notebooks. Samsung's model bears a resemblance to an 11-inch notebook Sony sold earlier this decade that was popular with mobile business professionals but cost upward of $2,000 at that time.

One cost advantage is that many of the components inside Samsung machines are made by its semiconductor and other finished product businesses. This includes Samsung's SuperBrite light-emitting diode, backlit liquid crystal displays.

It estimates that 80 percent of the value of its PCs are from Samsung

components - everything but the microprocessor and graphics chips. As the world’s biggest maker of memory chips, storage is Samsung’s biggest weapon.

The reentry into the U.S. highly competitive computer market will also be aided by Samsung’s strong established ties with business resellers, distributors and consumer retailers through sales of everything from TVs to monitors to phones.

In the first quarter of 2009, Samsung plans to rev up its sales distribution strategy, including corporate distributors such as CDW or Newegg and consumer retailers such as Best Buy, and regional U.S. store chains Fry’s Electronics or The Wiz.

Samsung’s announcement, which has been in the works for more than a month, coincides with Apple’s announcement later on Tuesday of upgraded notebook models. Analysts predict Apple may introduce a new line of notebooks for under $1,000.

FTC Busts Major Spam Operation

A U.S. district court this week ordered the owners of a major spam operation to shut down their operations immediately.

Lance Atkinson, a New Zealand citizen living in Australia, and Jody Smith of Texas, are accused of false advertising and selling non-FDA approved medications.

The duo operated the largest "spam gang" in the world, according to Spamhaus. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has received more than three million complaints related to their activities.

The ruling, handed down in the United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, comes after the FTC filed a complaint about Atkinson and Smith. The court has ordered a temporary injunction that bans the defendants from spamming and false advertising, and has also frozen their assets.

New Zealand authorities, working with the FTC, have also taken action.

Atkinson and Smith are accused of marketing male-enhancement pills, prescription drugs, and weight-loss medication through millions of spam e-mails.

One product, VPXL, is advertised as an herbal and 100 percent safe male-enhancement product. A sample obtained by the FTC, however, found that the medicine included sildenafil, the main ingredient in Viagra. Sildenafil can have adverse effects with drugs that contain nitrates, so men taking medicine for diabetes, high blood pressure, or high cholesterol, for example, could become seriously ill if they also took VPXL.

The pair also claimed to have generic versions of medications like Levitra, Avodart, Cialis, Propecia, Viagra, Lipitor, Celebrex, and Zoloft through a U.S.-licensed pharmacy.

The FTC made two undercover purchases, and they were not asked for any

prescription information. The agency discovered that the drugs were being shipped from India and had not been approved by the FDA.

The defendants also claimed to have a secure Web site for processing credit card transactions, but the FTC found no evidence of encryption technology.

The FTC's complaint says that Atkinson and Smith are liable for the spamming. Atkinson is held responsible for all product claims, while Smith is blamed for claims made for the pharmaceutical products.

Atkinson has already run into trouble with the FTC. In 2005, the agency obtained a $2.2 million judgment against him for running a similar spam operation that marketed herbal products.

Has Storm Stopped Sending Spam?

The creators of the Storm botnet have either ceased sending out spam or have moved on to a newer botnet, security researchers have concluded.

Marshal, a security vendor that specializes in spam protection, on Tuesday noted a marked downturn in the amount of spam attributed to hosts infected with Storm within the last month. For the last few weeks other researchers have also noticed the sharp decline.

"We don't know what happened here, if somebody put the kibosh on them or not," said Jose Nazario, a security researcher for Arbor Networks. "In terms of the number of hosts out there, there are still a lot of hosts - they're just sort of quiet."

Storm started and got its name from an infected e-mail promising information about a large winter storm in Europe in early 2007.

At its peak, in mid-2007, Storm accounted for up to 20 percent of all spam sent. Then, in September 2007, Microsoft included a removal signature in its Malicious Software Removal Tool. Security experts say that update alone removed up to a quarter million infected hosts and greatly diminished Storm's ability to produce large spam campaigns despite a few attempts earlier this year.

Foes See Problems in New Net Laws Protecting Children

President George Bush signed two bills into law on Monday that would protect children from online predators, but one group said the bills were rushed to the White House for signature without careful consideration.

While Congress considered the nation's financial bailout plan, other significant bills protecting children were being debated, including the Protect Our Children Act of 2008 (POCA) and Keeping the Internet Devoid of Sexual Predators Act (KIDSPA).

The POCA law will increase funding for fighting child pornography by

providing law enforcement with $320 million over the next five years, force the Department of Justice to develop a way to fight child pornography, and provide forensic and other resources to help state law enforcement protect children.

PROTECT, the National Association to Protect Children, a children's advocacy group, fought hard for the bill by testifying before Congress, as did talk-show host Oprah Winfrey, who encouraged her viewers to send letters to their state's senators supporting the bill.

The Center for Democracy and Technology (CDT), which promotes democratic values and liberties, believes there are some problems with POCA and some holes in KIDSPA.

John Morris, general counsel and director of CDT's Internet Standards, Technology and Policy Project, said Congress insisted on adding parts of another bill the SAFE Act before the bill would pass. He disagrees with a provision outsourcing investigative responsibilities to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). He believes the trend in Congress to outsource law-enforcement functions to private groups leads down a dangerous path.

Morris echoed the thoughts of Greir Weeks, PROTECT director, who testified before Congress on the same issue. "It would be inappropriate at best to house a database containing records on hundreds of thousands of U.S. citizens and millions of crimes in private or corporate hands, or to outsource such a core law-enforcement function," Weeks said. "We encourage you to exercise close oversight of the Department of Justice as it makes these decisions over the coming year."

Another problem provision, according to Morris, is a blacklist that NCMEC runs with Internet service providers.

"Although the program might have been desirable (and probably avoided constitutional concerns because NCMEC is private), now that Congress has authorized the program it runs smack into the clear constitutional prohibition against a governmental blacklist of content under a long line of 'prior restraint' cases," Morris said. "Congress did make clear that NCMEC's blacklist could only be used for a very narrow category of child pornography, but this narrowing of the program does not avoid its clear unconstitutionality."

Morris saw problems in KIDSPA as well. That law creates a national registry of sex offenders' e-mail addresses and allows social-networking services such as MySpace and Facebook to use the list to screen out sex offenders.

Morris said the definition of a "social network" in the bill is too broad and will be used to impose regulations on Web sites. Another problem, writes Morris in his blog, is that sex offenders who want to break the terms of their release by contacting minors can do so by simply creating new e-mail addresses.

A far more effective approach Congress could have taken would have been to allow probation officers to limit the ability of sex offenders to access social networks, according to Morris.

Fake Microsoft E-mail Contains Trojan Virus

Along with the vulnerabilities that Microsoft patched Tuesday, the software giant's customers have a new problem to grapple with: a fake notification e-mail that looks remarkably legitimate.

Attackers are apparently taking advantage of Microsoft's Patch Tuesday to send legitimate-looking e-mails that include a Trojan virus. Trojan.Backdoor.Haxdoor allows attackers to execute files and steal information from compromised computers. The fake mailing includes a legitimate-looking PGP signature, as well as purporting to come from a real Microsoft employee.

Christopher Budd, a security program manager in the Microsoft Security Response Center, offers this perspective on the e-mails in a security posting:

We received some questions from customers about an e-mail that's circulating that claims to be a security e-mail from Microsoft. The e-mail comes with an attached executable, which it claims is the latest security update, and encourages the recipient to run the attached executable so they can be safe. While malicious e-mails posing as Microsoft security notifications with attached malware aren't new (we've seen this problem for several years) this particular one is a bit different in that it claims to be signed by our own Steve Lipner and has what appears to be a PGP signature block attached to it. While those are clever attempts to increase the credibility of the mail, I can tell you categorically that this is not a legitimate e-mail: it is a piece of malicious spam and the attachment is malware. Specifically, it contains Backdoor:Win32/Haxdoor."

Dancho Danchev at ZDNet's Zero Day ponders whether the timing of this malware campaign will affect its success rate.

"Compared to the recent targeted malware attack against U.S schools, and the massive fake CNN news items campaign taking advantage of client-side vulnerabilities, this one is definitely going to have a lower success rate - no matter the timing," Danchev writes.

Microsoft's October 2008 security bulletin included four critical bulletins concerning Windows, Internet Explorer, Microsoft Host Integration Server, and Microsoft Excel.

FBI Sees Rise in Computer Crime

Computer spying and theft of personal information have risen notably in the past year, costing tens of millions of dollars and threatening U.S. security, the FBI's cyber division head said on Wednesday.

FBI Assistant Director Shawn Henry told reporters that organized-crime groups are drawn by the ease of reaching millions of potential victims.

He said as many as two dozen countries have taken an "aggressive interest" in penetrating the networks of U.S. companies and government agencies.

He declined to specify countries, but U.S. intelligence agencies have

voiced concern over Russia and China’s abilities to electronically spy on the United States and disrupt U.S. computer networks.

As one possible example of Russia’s electronic spying prowess, Georgia accused Moscow in August of conducting "cyber warfare" to shut down Georgian government websites at the same time as it carried out a military offensive.

U.S. federal agents are stepping up efforts to fight computer crime, and working with foreign counterparts where the rising wave of computer attacks has awakened international interest, Henry said.

"Over the past year the malicious activity has become much more prevalent," Henry said. "The threat continues to increase."

An attack method growing in popularity is "botnets," in which malicious software spreads via viruses to computers of unwitting individuals and companies forms networks that can then be used for data theft or shutting down a system, Henry said.

Another method, "Spearfishing," when hackers get a copy of a company’s e-mail list, then send out official-looking requests for employee personal information, has also been a growing problem, he said.

He said computer crime has invaded Wall Street, but had nothing to do with the current financial system crises.

Individual investment companies have, however, lost tens of millions of dollars through "pump and dump" schemes in which criminals penetrated multiple client accounts and used them to run up the price of low-liquidity stocks and dump them from their own accounts.

Internet Crime Complaint Center, which the FBI helps run, has recorded more than 1 million complaints since its founding in 2000 and numbers are now running about 18,000 to 20,000 per month, Henry said.

Days of Rage on the Internet

Must be the special circumstances regarding current events, but folks again are losing their minds in very public fashion - on the Internet.

Monday’s New York Times ran a piece detailing how a fringe activist has helped spread the rumor that Barack Obama is a Muslim.

The press release was picked up by a conservative Web site, FreeRepublic.com, and spread steadily as others elaborated on its claims over the years in e-mail messages, Web sites, and books. It continues to drive other false rumors about Mr. Obama’s background.

(And while I write these words, another e-mail arrived, asking in the subject line: "Does Obama fulfill Muslim prophecy?" and linking to one of the more insane videos that I’ve seen devoted to the topic.

I’d like to give my follow countrymen credit for being more discerning than to trust everything they read or view on the Internet as fact. (Although I’m still not sure what to make of the fact that the movie Beverly Hills Chihuahua is No. 1 at the box office.) Well, we are in the

midst of the political silly season and you can discount some of what's going on as part of the quadrennial nonsense that gets tossed around during any presidential campaign.

But the tone of the junk mail flooding in the last couple of weeks is boiling over with rage - and it's not just directed against Obama's supposed effort to conceal his "real" identity.

In the aftermath of the market meltdown, the Anti-Defamation League < http://www.adl.org/PresRele/Internet_75/5366_75.htm > reports a "dramatic upsurge" in "the number of anti-Semitic statements being posted to Internet discussion boards devoted to finance and the economy."

Here's a sampling of some of the pearls of wisdom the ADL found posted:

* "(Jews have) infiltrated Wall Street and government and have ruined our country."

* "What is a GS Jew? Goldman Sachs? Jews are greedy, rotten slime balls."

* They (Jews) love money nothing else, no faith or religion can be so heartless to their victims."

* That's how they work, they short the stock all the way making billions and then cover right it up sell (sic) and then taxpayers to the rescue and it is true all those institutions are ran by Jews ....

This is of a piece with the post-September 11 rumors about the Mossad reportedly issuing secret instructions to Jews not to go to work on the morning of the attacks on the World Trade Center. The latest story line focuses on the collapse of Lehman and "Jewish control of the banking industry and suggestions that Jews hold complete power over government and the financial services sector," according to the ADL..

It's easy to blame a lot of this on the spillover of rants commonly associated with Internet forums for white supremacists and neo-Nazis, making their way into more mainstream venues. Extremists always shout loudest during times of political or economic crisis. So it is that the latest conspiracy making the rounds details how "senior Jewish officials at the Lehman Brothers investment bank passed their clients' money on to three Israeli banks, with the intention of then escaping to Israel to enjoy the take without fear of extradition."

The stock market's sharp rebound on Monday notwithstanding, this remains a lousy economy and people are rightly scared. And with another couple of weeks to go before the nation chooses its next president, there's a lot more bile waiting to be spilled. Before we lapse back into something resembling normalcy, I fear that there are more days of rage ahead.

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